Acts: *On Knowing Anything At All*
Acts 17: 10-15

As we continue our journey through Acts, we have come to Acts 17:10-15 (ESV). Please stand and let’s read the Word of God together.

If you recall, Paul and Silas, along with Timothy and Luke, have most recently been in the city of Thessalonica sharing the Gospel in the local synagogue. We learned last week that many people came to the faith following Paul’s presentations, but there were some zealous Jews who were very offended by Paul’s message…to the degree that they rounded up an angry mob and stormed the house belonging to a man named Jason where Paul and Silas were staying. Since Paul and Silas were away, the mob dragged Jason and some of his Christian friends into the city center where they were accused of treason before the city authorities. Jason was able to diffuse the situation by paying a bond to the authorities, and fortunately the new believers were released from custody.

So that brings us to our text today, beginning with vs. 10: The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue.

As always, I want you to get a sense of the geography spoken of here in our story, so let’s look to our trusty map for just a minute (https://openoureyeslord.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/map.png). As you can see, Berea is about 45 miles south/southwest of Thessalonica. Unlike Thessalonica, Berea is not on the famous Via Egnatia, which actually continues due west from Thessalonica. The famous Roman politician, Cicero, once wrote that Berea was an “out of the way” town, revealing that it was not on the main road. When occupied by the Greeks, Berea was a wealthy city which hosted many athletic events. As a Roman city, Berea was known as a religious center. The residents were thought to be sophisticated and wealthy, though much of their wealth was at the expense of slavery.

So, Paul and Silas are essentially smuggled out of Thessalonica in the middle of the night, and after arriving in Berea, what do they do? They go right back into the Jewish synagogue and again, Paul is reasoning, explaining, and proving from scriptures that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ. Let’s pick up the story in vs. 11: Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them, therefore, believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men.

Now, Luke will reveal some cultural biases here in this text that we need to unpack, so let’s do so VERY CAREFULLY!
First, Luke refers to the Berean Jews as “more noble” than the Thessalonians Jews. The adjective that he uses here is the word “eugeneis”. In the Greek “eu” means ‘good’ and “geneis” means ‘race, stock, or kin.’ So the word “noble” here refers to those of “good stock”…those who were “high born.”

Does anybody know what word we get from “eugenis?” Right…that’s where we get the word “eugenics,” which is a very dirty word indeed when we think about the Nazis and Darwinian philosophies.

On a lighter note, if you just happened to be named EUGENE, your name literally means “Good Stock” or “high born!” Tell that to the next bully who picks on you…I’m sure that will help.

Now, in this context, Luke is unapologetically suggesting that the Jews in Berea are a more noble, or a more “high born” group of people. Contextually speaking, we can probably assume that means that the Jews in Berea are wealthier, better educated, better read, more sophisticated, and certainly more intellectually curious than the Jews in Thessalonica.

Now if that is offensive to you, I would ask you to remember that in no way is this scripture suggesting favoritism towards the “high born.” Luke is simply making an observation, and it is an observation that is consistent with what we know of Berea from other historical sources: the Bereans likely were, by in large, a wealthier, better educated group of people than the Thessalonians. It does appear that Luke associates the “noble” characteristics of the Bereans with a greater openness to the Gospel and an eagerness to study the Scriptures to see if the claims of the Gospel stood up to inspection. Again, this should not be a surprise to us as 21st century believers. Why?

People who are “noble” in the truest sense of the word are those who are intellectually curious and teachable. People who are intellectually curious are those who are already asking and wrestling with the big questions that all people are asking, whether they are consciously aware of it or not. The big questions in every culture always boil down to generally the same universal dilemmas: How did we get here? Does God exist? What is the purpose of our existence? Why are we both beautiful and so messed up at the same time? What are we going to do about this universal moral conviction that we are condemned? What happens after we die?

The “noble” Jews in Berea are those who are genuinely seeking truth regarding these questions. They are open to new learning and the claims of the Gospel…but note: they do not believe the claims of the Gospel simply because Paul comes in and says, “This is true. Believe me. Take my word for it…Jesus is the Messiah.” Luke writes, “They examined the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” The Berean Jews look to the revealed Word of God to discover truth, and
to test what they are hearing from Paul. They yield to the authority of Scripture. Herein is THE critical point that we must unpack for the remainder of our time together.

The claims of the Gospel are not intuitive or based upon people’s feelings about what should be true because we feel like it should be true. The claims of the Gospel are rooted in Scripture; Scripture is rooted in history; the history of God’s self-revelation through a specific group of people is something that must be taught and learned and understood with the mind; and thus we come to learn about God and the hope of the Gospel both through hearing and by reading God’s WORD…God’s self-revelation as revealed to us in the Scriptures.

Now, the unique revelation of Scripture in the Bible is a big problem for our post-modern culture. Many people in the West are quick to say, “Well I don’t believe in the Bible, I believe in Science.”

What they mean is this: “I believe that true “knowing” comes only through observation of the natural world. When we apply logic to our observation, we are now dealing with ‘pure reason.’” For the post-modern atheist, pure reason is the only practical means of knowing things as opposed to superstitious myths and fairy-tales, which is what they categorize all writings that claim to be “revelation.”

Westerners pride themselves on being objective and dispassionate about truth, so the atheist epistemology is appealing to many, but this philosophy regarding how we can know things crumbles under inspection. No one is unbiased in their starting place, not even the most “reasonable” atheist. Here’s why: As soon as we say, “I believe that the only means of knowing is ‘observation’ or ‘pure reason,’” we should immediately become aware of the fact that we have no observation or ‘pure reason’ to substantiate our claim. We are assuming this statement is true and self-evident…but it’s not. It lacks the very observable, repeatable evidence that we just said all truth is required to have. Just like many religious people, the atheist is assuming his biased starting place, even though he can provide no evidence to support it…thus the atheist is as guilty of a “leap of faith” as the religious people they critique.

So does that mean that we are left with relativism…such that everyone just makes up their own truth since everyone is biased? This is now the trend in our culture, but that is ridiculous. The intelligent person must look to the answer that comes closest to accounting for what we can see and observe in ourselves and the world around us.

In the argument surrounding the existence of God, there is no scientific “proof” that can either prove or disprove God’s existence in a purely “scientific” methodology of observation and experimentation. However, what narrative provides the best explanation for what is observable in ourselves and in the world around us? What narrative best answers the questions we are all...
asking? The narrative insisting that God exists? Or the narrative that insists that God does not exist?

Should we work on the premise that God exists, we would expect to observe a “creation” that bears the marks of a brilliant Creator. We would expect to see a creation that reflects the moral and personal nature of the Creator. We would expect to find a creation that has been specifically ordered, specifically preserved, and specifically designed for the flourishing and continuation of its existence. Since these are, in fact, the very things that we can observe in ourselves and the world around us, the argument for God’s existence makes far more sense than the argument against God’s existence, since that argument would assume that none of these attributes would exist; when, in fact, even a first grader can observe that the tell-tale signs of a good, orderly creation are all around us. In other words, believing in God makes sense of everything else.

As C. S. Lewis writes in Mere Christianity, “I believe in God as I believe the sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.”

God’s self-revelation in Scripture is exactly this…it is the Light that sheds light upon everything else. To that end, I am convinced that a plain reading of the Old and New Testament is the only intellectually satisfying explanation for what we see and experience every day, beginning with our ourselves and the world around us. Only a biblical worldview gives a reasonable explanation for how we got here; why the universe is ordered by laws; why the earth is precariously held in a balance that so perfectly accommodates life; why we are personal and moral and relational and intelligent as human beings as opposed to other living organisms made of the same materials that are not personal or moral. Only the Bible gives a satisfying answer as to why we are at one and the same time both beautiful and broken. Only the Bible helps us to understand the origin and the problem of evil. Only the Bible provides a clear and compelling picture of what happens when we die that both satisfies our questions about those things we all know MUST be eternal like love, justice, mercy, truth, and those things we all know to be temporal like bodies and planets and the rest of those things made of matter.

I suspect some of you are asking: But can we not learn all we need to learn about God and truth from observing the world around us and applying logic? Do we really need the Bible to know what is true?

When a Russian cosmonaut returned from space and reported that he had not found God, C. S. Lewis responded that this was like Hamlet going into the attic of his castle looking for Shakespeare.

As Timothy Keller writes in The Reason for God, “If there is a God, he wouldn’t be another object in the universe that could be put in a lab and analyzed with empirical methods. He would
relate to us the way a playwright relates to the characters in his play. We (characters) might be able to know quite a lot about the playwright, but only to the degree the author chooses to put information about himself into the play.”

In the Bible, God chooses to put information about Himself into the great drama of human existence so that we might get to know Him. Some of that information is explicit, like His law—the 10 Commandments. Some of the clues are implicit...they point to something that is coming, SOMEONE who is coming. But the revelation that trumps all revelation is when the Author enters into the story as an actual Character...the leading Character, the central Character that is unmistakably unique and unparalleled in all of human history; which, of course, is what we would expect should the Author write Himself into the play.

But how can we be sure that this man, Jesus of Nazareth, is the final and ultimate revelation of the Author? Well let me ask you a question: If you were the Author, how would you make sure that your central Character...which is you...could not be missed in the one big story of human history?

Perhaps you would write in clues that the Main Character was coming...clues that would make His arrival unmistakable and obvious. Perhaps you would predict that He would be born of a virgin...you might predict hundreds of years earlier the city in which he would be born. You might also predict his suffering and the manner in which he would die. And perhaps you would entrust such clues and information to the prophets and the poets such that they would be written down...so that the other characters, upon reading and hearing of such clues, would be anticipating His arrival.

And then, at just the right time, you would enter into that story as a Character who satisfied all the clues. You would enter into the story as a Character that reveals to all the other Characters who you truly are as the Author. You would reveal through that leading Character what this story is actually about...what the goal of the story is...what the desire of the Playwright is for all the characters on stage.

And then you would leave the stage in a way that no one would ever forget...an unprecedented way that would make this Character both irreplaceable and unforgettable. Can there be any doubt that the leading character in all of human history is this man Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the one who was born of a virgin, announced by angels, lived a perfect human life, was publicly executed but then rose again on the third day as attested to by multiple witnesses? Is there another human life that even comes close to the influence of this Jewish carpenter from Nazareth? No...there is not. He was the greatest of us all...He was the Leading Character in this story of life on earth.
Now…can you see that we cannot KNOW much about God unless the Author of Life REVEALS those things to us in a way that we can learn about and understand? And how do humans beings learn and understand? For the most part, we learn and understand and pass on that learning and understanding with WORDS. Words are what set humans apart from other forms of living creatures. WORDS are irreplaceable when it comes to learning. So is it any wonder that John begins his gospel with these words: “In the beginning was the WORD, and the WORD was with God, and the WORD was God.”

True learning begins with the WORD…God made flesh…the LOGOS…the incarnation of and the very nature of GOD who took on flesh that we might know the Author…who is also the Father…who is God, who loves us all more than we could ever know.

Friends, we cannot truly know God apart from the WORD, and we won’t know THE WORD---the Son of God---apart from reading, hearing, and understanding God’s self-revelation in the Scriptures as found in the Old and New Testaments. The Bible is God’s self-revelation as the Author to all of us characters in HIS STORY…HISTORY. Like the Bereans, we demonstrate a nobility of spirit and true intellectual integrity when we study the Scriptures daily to see if “these things are true.”

What things? Everything that claims to be true. Every commercial on TV. Every book that you read. Every sermon that you listen to. Every class you sit through in college. Every claim of truth ever made is subject to the authority of God’s self-revelation in scripture, beginning and ending with Jesus Christ, the ultimate and final revelation of God’s very person and nature. True learning and knowledge begins and ends with Jesus Christ. He is the Truth, the Way, and the Life. There is no other way to the Father…no other way to even KNOW the Father…but through Him. He is the Sun that allows us to see everything else there is to see.

The concept that knowledge is only available through dispassionate observation of the physical world is incredibly misguided. On the contrary, all knowing is inextricably moral. Bradley Green does an excellent job of unpacking this concept in his book, The Gospel and the Mind, and I encourage you to pick it up and study it carefully if you would like to understand the basis for this statement. (see Bradley Green’s “The Gospel and the Mind” location 2619).

Here’s what I mean by that all knowing is inextricably moral: true knowing only happens when our hearts and minds are open and cleansed to receive what only God can reveal to us. When our loves are misordered…when our hearts are set on things that are dishonoring to God…we are rendered unable to KNOW accurately. Such is why the rebellious heart can never be “argued” back to God; nor can the immoral atheist be convinced that a loving God exists through apologetics. Knowing is moral precisely because Truth is a PERSON, not a test-tube.
Think of your spouse or your kids or your best friend at school. You may know some information about those people by reading their Facebook page, but you won’t KNOW those people until they want to be known. They will not allow you to know them until there is a relationship, and you won’t truly know them until there is a loving relationship.

We are this way as humans because we come from a personal God. As such, God will only be known when He is first honored. We will never know God first, and then honor Him…it doesn’t work that way. Such is why worship, praise, confession of sin, and repentance are absolutely necessary PRIOR to the teaching of the Word in a church worship service. You won’t learn about God and His nature until you turn your heart to Him in worship-- until you honor Him with your honesty, repentance, and adoration. Only then will God reveal Himself to you in a way that you will KNOW Him, and by virtue of knowing Him, only then will you ever truly KNOW anything at all.

For those who are bound up in rebellious immorality, the very mention of God’s name brings fear, dread, and a desire to escape…and understandably so. The Sun reveals that which is covered up in disease and darkness. But listen friends: to see one’s own sin is a gift! It leads to confession and heartfelt repentance…it leads to a desperation for forgiveness and the need for a Savior…and then…and only then…will God allow you to KNOW Him and the deep love that He has for you and me. Only then will the Gospel make any sense to you at all. I remember that day when God showed me my sin in the Princeton Seminary Chapel…it was a dark day, but I was desperate to KNOW HIM. I was crushed and humbled, and then I was saved by a Love that would not let me go. That day changed my life, because I knew that I knew that I knew…God is there, and He loves me, and Jesus has saved me. Do you know that you know that you know? You won’t know until you humble yourself before the King.

Friends…are you NOBLE of heart? Are you intellectually curious and open to learning? Are you willing to come with bended knee before the King, humble and looking for forgiveness? Then come and join us, as we daily examine the Scriptures to see and to KNOW what is true. To learn of the One who created us and who saved us…He is our King, and He is calling each and every person here to Himself. Will you come? Let’s pray.